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NEW SPECIES OF THE MONTH: THE CRESTED IGUANA

Reptiles are often overlooked when it comes to trumpeting the discovery of new species in the press. After all, recent finds have not been large animals (the last crocodile described was in 1935), and reptiles in general are certainly not as cuddly as, say, the recently discovered Rio Maues marmoset. Accordingly, this issue reaches back a few years to give an important reptile find its due.

In January of 1979, Fijian biologist John Gibbons visited the island of Yandua looking for a rare species, the banded iguana. What he found instead was a yet-unclassified reptile. The new find was an emerald-green, tree-dwelling lizard about thirty inches long, marked with three narrow bands of white and further distinguished by conical spikes rising from its back.

Gibbons named the new-found species the crested iguana (*Brachylophus vitiensis*). This handsome lizard undergoes an interesting transformation if startled. The basic body color quickly darkens to black and the spikes stand erect. The result is a much meaner-looking lizard, like a member of some reptilian biker gang.

The species was obviously a rare one, and Gibbons originally thought it was confined to Yandua. The first clue to the contrary surfaced in 1980, when Gibbons was discussing the lizard with herpetologist Kraig Adler. Adler told him that an acquaintance had reported spotting an odd iguana in the movie *The Blue Lagoon*. Gibbons waited anxiously for the film to arrive in Fiji. When it did, he watched it closely. And there it was: a crested iguana, filmed in another island chain, the Yasawas. Scientific discoveries are made in all kinds of unlikely ways.

Sources: Gibbons, John R.H. 1984. "Discovery of a Brand-New Million-Year-Old Iguana," *Animal Kingdom*, February-March. // Gibbons, John R.H. 1984. "On the Trail of the Crested Iguana," *Animal Kingdom*, December/January.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO... STELLER'S SEA COW

The known history of Steller's sea cow (*Hydrodamalis gigas*) is very brief. In 1741, naturalist Georg Wilhelm Steller was shipwrecked on Bering Island. This is one of the Komandorski Islands, lying in the frigid waters between Kamchatka and the Aleutians. There he and his companions met the sea cow.

The sea cow was a huge plant-eating mammal, a relative to the dugong and manatee, but much larger than either. Up to 35 feet long, it had a bilobed tail like a whale's and a placid disposition that made it easy to approach - or harpoon. It also boasted a very rough skin, looking more like bark than hide, and strange hooflike nails on its flippers. The inoffensive creatures were also loyal, gathering around an injured animal. That instinct, while admirable, did little to promote their survival.

After Steller's crew escaped the island and reported the find, sealers and other voyagers began stopping off in the sea cow's haunts to slaughter the inoffensive mammals for their meat. By 1768, the species had apparently been hunted to extinction.

Evidence for the animal's continued existence is slender but persistent. Native hunters reported killing them as late as 1780. Early Russian colonizers of Bering Island reported sighting sea cows in the 1830s. Fifty years later, the explorer Nordenskiold returned from the region with a sea cow skeleton of unknown age and a report that sea cows were still seen in the 1850s. In 1910, fishermen in Russia's Gulf of Anadyr reported a sea cow stranded on the beach, but this was never investigated. The sea cow's range may well have extended beyond the Komandorskis, as 18th-century reports placed them along the Kamchatkan coast and occasionally in the Aleutians.

Despite these intriguing tales, the scientific consensus is that the sea cow didn't make it out of the 18th century. All that remained were a few sketches, some incomplete skeletal remains, and the sea cow's smaller relatives from warmer climates.

A Russian whaler, the *Buran*, revived interest in the sea cow story in 1962. In the same gulf where the 1910 report had originated, the *Buran*'s crew sighted a herd of dark-skinned animals over twenty feet long they could not identify. The description, made at a range of less than a hundred yards, matched Steller's sea cow very well. Another sighting by Russian fishermen was reported in 1977.

Unfortunately, no one has seen these alleged sea cows or any others since. A Russian mammologist, V.G. Heptner, has dismissed the recent reports as misidentifications of female narwhals, which are almost size reported and do not possess the distinctive tusks of narwhal males. Still, one wonders: wouldn't whalers, of all people, know whales when they saw them?

Could science really have overlooked a creature about as mobile and inconspicuous as a derelict ship? Fraser's dolphin (*Lagenodelphis hosei*), which is smaller but much more numerous and widespread, went completely unreported between the time the first specimen washed up in 1895 and the species' rediscovery in 1971. That's hardly evidence, but it is, perhaps, a source of hope.

Sources: Dietz, Tim. 1992. *The Call of the Siren.* Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing. // Haley, Delphine. 1978. "The Saga of Steller's Sea Cow," *Natural History,* November. // Mackal, Roy. 1980. *Searching for Hidden Animals.* New York: Doubleday. // Stejneger, Leonhard. 1936. *Georg Wilhelm Steller.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

MYSTERY ANIMAL: THE TWO-FINNED DOLPHIN

One common feature of known whales and dolphins is that they have only one dorsal fin. (A few, such as the finless porpoise, get by with none at all.) Like most rules, this one appears to have at least one exception; an animal which has never been caught but whose existence seems fairly well established.

A large dolphin with two dorsal fins has been seen several times in the Pacific and the Mediterranean. The second fin is small and located just behind the head.

A whole school of such dolphins was seen in 1819 off New South Wales by French naturalists Jean Quoy and Joseph Gaimard. These two were well-respected in zoological circles, having also discovered the hourglass dolphin of the same region. The observers wrote that "the volume of the animal was about double that of the ordinary porpoise, and the top of its body, as far as the dorsal fin, was spotted with black and white."

The dolphins swam close by the witnesses' ships, the *Physicienne* and *Uranie,* enabling Quoy and Gaimard to sketch the animals. Their drawing shows a black body marked with irregular splotches of white. The scientists did not get a good look at the animals' heads, which were never raised out of the water.

Quoy and Gaimard were certain enough of their discovery to publish their report and propose a formal scientific name, *Delphinus rhinoceros.* Their countrymen Michel Raynal and Jean-Pierre Sylvestre, who recently brought this subject up to date with an article in *Aquatic Mammals,* note that, without a specimen, we can't be sure this *is* a dolphin and not a beaked whale.

Any such uncertainty is not a reason to discount the sighting. Cetaceans' dorsal fins are made up of tissue only, without the supporting spines present in the fins of fish, so there is no practical reason why some species couldn't have two of them. Indeed, a freak common dolphin, sporting an extra dorsal fin well back towards the tail, was observed off England in 1857.

TWO-FINNED DOLPHIN (CONT.):

As mentioned, this is not the only sighting. The Italian naturalist Antonio Montigore had reported the same or a similar dolphin almost a century earlier from the other side of the world.

If the species seen by Quoy and Gaimard still exists, then someone, someday, will bring one home for proper examination, and a most unusual new dolphin will be added to the textbooks...and perhaps to the exhibits at Sea World, too.

Sources: Heuvelmans, Bernard. 1968. *In the Wake of the Sea-Serpents*. New York: Hill and Wang. // Raynal, Michel. 1991. "Cetaceans with two dorsal fins," *Aquatic Mammals*, Vol. 17.1.

NEWS AND COMMENT

British zoologist Karl P. N. Shuker reports that **a new muntjac deer** has been collected in vietnam. The yet-undescribed species, larger than other muntjacs, lives in the Vu Quang Nature Reserve, home of the recently discovered **Vu Quang oryx** (or Vu Quang ox, a more taxonomically correct name now coming into general use). Two large mammals from the same area in two years? It's not quite like finding the yeti, but cryptozoologists no doubt feel vindicated nontheless. (Shuker, 1994: letter, May 20.)

Dr. Shuker also kindly provided an article from the *Daily Mail* (March 14, 1994), with more details on the alleged **faking of the famous 1934 photograph of the Loch Ness "monster."** One of the self-proclaimed hoaxers made a deathbed confession on the subject, saying the picture shows a foot-tall Plastic Wood model attached to a toy submarine. Shuker has his doubts, wondering if Plastic Wood was even made in 1934: this author has written to the company to check. (**Comment:** I don't claim the photo shows an unclassified monster, but it's difficult to look at the recently discovered full-sized version of the photograph (Wilson and LeBlond, *Cryptozoology*, Vol. 6), which includes the far shore of the loch, and accept that the object shown is only a foot high.)

The most celebrated of "prehistoric" fish, the **coelacanth,** may be more widespread than we thought. (**Comment**: it would have been a good zoological in-joke to see Wilma filleting one for dinner in the new *Flintstones* movie.) A specimen was found off Mozambique in 1991. Two small silver fish models, resembling the coelacanth more than anything else, have been uncovered, dating possibly to the seventeenth century and originating in Mexico or Spain. Finally, there are now three reports of coelacanth-like scales turning up in the United States. The best-documented case remains the scale purchased by a Tampa curio-shop owner in 1949. She sent it to an ichthyologist, Dr. Isaac Ginsburg, who thought it came from a coelacanth or something similar. (Greenwell, 1994: See full cite under "Periodicals," below.)

RESOURCES:

BOOKS.

Brakefield, Tom. 1993. ***Kingdom of Might: The World's Big Cats.*** Stillwater, MN: Voyageur Press. A fascinating and sumptuously illustrated tour of the great cats, brought to life by the author's own photography. Brakefield also discusses feline hybrids and the color variations of each species. Cryptozoologists will be disappointed by what's missing: there is nothing on the apparent puma subspecies known as the onza, the marozi (spotted lion), or the possible survival of the Caspian and Javan tigers. (Brakefield's bibliography lists Dr. Karl Shuker's *Mystery Cats of the World*, which documents all these cases. See also Issue #1 of this newsletter.) Brakefield also makes a puzzling reference to the "extinct" Sinai leopard, *Panthera pardus jarvisi*, which was actually rediscovered in the 1970s (see Clark, *International Wildlife*, Jan/Feb 1988). Still very worthwhile.

Dietz, Tim. 1992. ***The Call of the Siren.*** Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing. Well-written and affectionate book on the manatee and its relatives, paying special attention to the Florida manatee. A good discussion of Steller's sea cow (see above article) and its possible survival is included.

PERIODICALS.

Anonymous. 1994. "**Fake in the Lake**," *People*, March 28, p.109. More on the alleged hoax of the Loch Ness "Surgeon's Photograph."

Huyghe, Patrick. "**Maine Event**," *Audubon*, May/June 1994, pp.19-20. Discusses 1993 photograph of a cougar, allegedly a wild specimen seen in Maine, along with other possible evidence of the Eastern cougar's survival.

Greenwell, J. Richard. 1994. "**Prehistoric Fishing**," *BBC Wildlife*, March, p. 33. Recent events in the study of the coelacanth and its possible range beyond the Comoros Islands.

Rogers, Michael. 1993. "**Little Birds Lost**," *National Wildlife*, October/November, p.20. Review of the uncertain status of Hawaii's native honeycreepers, including recently-discovered, rediscovered, and possibly extinct species.

IN CLOSING:

Thanks to those who've responded to the first two issues. I welcome comments, corrections, or clippings. Responses to the editor may be directed to 802 Williamsburg Dr., Kokomo, IN 46902, USA.

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